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ABSTRACT

The lexicon of present-day English is changing rapidly and regularly, and a description and explanation of this change is necessary for any comprehensive diachronic theory. An examination of a corpus of 500 new words collected during 1975 provides the basis for a typology of lexical change that both supports and suggests modifications for the theories of language change of Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968) and Samuels (1972). The rarest neologisms are nonce words and words created from scratch (zero-derivatives); somewhat more common are words consisting of new or uncommon morphs combined with more ordinary ones. Least rare are new combinations of old morphs; borrowings from other languages, cultures, or specialized or non-elite dialects; words created by analogy; and words modified to fit new syntactic slots. Words may simply have their semantic range altered, or existing words may fossilize in phrases acting as single semantic units. Lexical change usually involves material already present in the language system or in that of a contact system. It occurs in all idiolects and registers in response to definable linguistic forces, in various degrees of consciousness; and its diffusion, while not necessarily predictable, can be mapped according to a number of specific linguistic, social, and psychological variables. Particular attention is paid to the neutralization of sex references where they are not contextually relevant. (Author/KM)

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Lexical Change in Present-Day English

Dennis E. Baron

Neologism is the most easily observed type of linguistic change, and one that is too often ignored by theorists, who tend to see it as too complex or irregular to fit comfortably into a diachronic theory.* It does not go unnoticed in the popular press, however, where it is seen, oddly enough, as evidence of the death of English, or of its moribundity, a reflex of the decay of our moral and natural resources. This pessimistic attitude is not new; suspicion of language change seems a sociolinguistic universal. Ben Jonson, in his English Grammar (1640), urges us to keep our language healthy by freeing it from "rudeness" and "barbarism," and we are warned today by prescriptive writers like Jean Stafford and Edwin Newman that the only thing worse than the present semantic devaluation of English words is the newfangleness with which we replenish our bankrupt lexicon. Despairing over the excessive use by politicians of viable, Newman says "It is at least conceivable that our politics would be improved if our English were, and so would other parts of our national life." (Newman, p. 5) And Stafford complains, "We have been surfeited with vogue words ("charisma," "clout," "escalate"). All parts of speech have been put into a giant blender and verbs and nouns have been homogenized ("to alibi," "to structure"). (Stafford 23/1) Resenting innovation, these critics confuse grammar and aesthetics, creating in their readers a sense of linguistic insecurity that produces further innovation through hypercorrection.

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Even sober cataloguers and descriptivists like Hans Marchand resent the ease with which semantic systems shift: "many [American] neologisms are coined for the sheer pleasure of coining, as stunts. Newspapermen, radio speakers, comic-strip artists play a great role in the production of words. Some papers seem to make it a point to present the public with a couple of new words in every number.... Countless grotesque words in _itis_ are incessantly coined, but none of them has so far passed into Standard American English. Their occurrence in newspapers ...proves nothing at all. Newspapers have a language of their own." (Marchand, p. 9f.) Sociolinguists will study ongoing shifts in phonology and, to a lesser degree, in syntax, but they often prefer, in discussing semantic change, to stick to the past despite the high rate of lexical change apparent today and the warning of Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog that no matter how richly recorded and rigorously studied, the past can never replace the present as a laboratory for the linguist. (Weinreich, et al., p. 164)

Despite forecasts of doom, present-day English is nowhere near dead. Its lexicon is changing rapidly and regularly, and a description and explanation of this change is necessary for any comprehensive diachronic theory. A corpus of some 400 new words collected during 1975 (largely from newspapers), provides the basis for a typology of lexical change to be sketched here. A neologism is defined quite loosely here as a word which does not appear in _Webster's Third New International Dictionary_ (including the 1971 Supplement), _Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary_ (8th edition), The 1972 Supplement (A-G) to the _Oxford English Dictionary_, and _The Barnhart Dictionary of New English Since 1963_, or which occurs in one or more of these in a different sense. Some of the words in the corpus are not really

new, they are simply appearing for the first time in registers where they are likely to be noticed and recorded: e.g., both _traying_ and _shopping bag lady_ are terms that have been current in Boston and New York, respectively, for at least fifteen years. Although I have collected several citations for some words (_white flight_, _competency-based_, _no-growth_), most occur only once in the corpus, and nothing can be said about their first occurrence in the language or their spread--some may be destined to have little lasting effect. It is possible that the recording here of apparent nonce words like _de-sexigrate_ may preserve them "unnaturally"--but I think the use of the word in the _New York Times_, where it was exposed to a wider audience, is more likely to affect its development.

The present collection of words is far from exhaustive--it is estimated that several thousand new words are coined in English each year--and there is virtually no sociological information accompanying the citations to indicate the direction of change. But the material collected is sufficient (with occasional supplementation from _The Barnhart Dictionary of New English_) to consider lexical change in general and there is enough data on one specific change, the neutralization of sex references when they are not contextually relevant, both to support and suggest modifications for the diachronic theories of Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968), and M. L. Samuels (1972).

Both linguistic and extralinguistic factors influence lexical change. The cultural motivation of some neologisms is clearly demonstrable. Many are nonce words in the sense that they describe short-term phenomena. They are so specifically context-tied that they are not likely to be revived unless the situation that caused their creation should reoccur, e.g.,

babylift, coined during the evacuation of children from Cambodia and South Vietnam, and phone out, referring to the loss of telephone service in much of lower Manhattan after a fire at a telephone switching center. Similarly, older phenomena restricted to a geographical or social area may suddenly be highlighted and explained for a wider audience. The term shopping bag lady, long familiar to New Yorkers, is treated as a word needing explanation in the following, from a Boston Globe article: "The woman is one of the legion of New York's 'shopping bag ladies,' a pitiful band of homeless women who wander the streets of Midtown," (Jack Cavanaugh, Boston Globe 20 June 1975, 8/3), and in another from the New York Times we are told bag ladies are "old women living out of shopping bags on the subways and parks." (4 July, 1975, 27/3) The term shopping bag itself is not attested in the standard dictionaries, although its familiarity is presumed in the following, where it serves as a translation for a British term: "'I have a nightmare,' Denis Cecil Hills once told friends. 'I am an old man in Birmingham with a carrier bag [shopping bag] and a dog on the lead in the rain.'" (Bernard Weinraub, NYTimes 11 July, 1975, 3/6)

Inventions and discoveries require new names, e.g., crosstie memory, a computer component developed by the Navy which "is so called because its structure resembles the cross ties of a railroad track," and U particle, a subatomic particle "temporarily dubbed the U particle, for Unknown." New names sometimes cause changes in older forms: the widespread use of electrically amplified musical instruments prompted the addition of the modifier acoustic, as in acoustic guitar or acoustic bass, to refer to the older, non-amplified instruments, and the spread of videotape prompted audio-tape for what had previously been the only kind of recording tape. Specific

product names often substitute for generic terms, and the following complaint from the Xerox Corporation against the "misuse" of a copyrighted name in this case indicates the process to be well advanced: "in order to protect yourself, and us, please use Xerox as a proper adjective and not as a verb or noun. Thus, you can copy on the Xerox copier but you can't Xerox something. You can go to the Xerox copier but not to the Xerox." (NYTimes 12 Feb., 1975, op ed page) In fact, this paper was xeroxed on equipment made by the IBM Corporation.

Technical and stigmatized forms both occur in limited registers and generally do not occur elsewhere except when they are reported on to the speech community in general. Post pericardiotomy syndrome ('characterized by a fever that can reach 104 degrees Fahrenheit and by sharp chest pains. These usually begin one to two weeks after an incision has been made in the pericardium') is a complex term not likely to appear in ordinary speech unless it affects more of the population than it does at present, whereas insonify, a term associated with the acoustic camera, and mule, 'courier for an illicit drug operation', could more easily be adapted to other contexts, e.g., loudspeaker advertisements and couriers in general, as bottom line and rip off have already done.

Long-term cultural phenomena, such as widespread social and political movements (e.g., the women's movement) or new areas of study (e.g., transformational grammar) can generate entire vocabularies. The former gives us such terms as affirmative action, herstory, chairperson, women's movement, assertiveness training, and uppity woman, and the latter, kernal sentence, transformation, embedding, relativization, and questionizing. Those opposed to the movements create new words too, e.g., desexigrate (from desex+desegregate)

which first appears in leaflet distributed at an anti-ERA rally: "all public schools, college dormitories, and hospital rooms would be required to 'desexigrate'" (Douglas Kneeland, NYTimes 7 Feb., 1975, 37/3); and the following letter in TLS complaining of a new term for statistical history: "But cliometrics and cliometricians? These are unfortunate coinages. It is as though astronomers, impressed by the power and versatility of their new instruments...should find astronomy and astronomers tame and out of date and decide to call their science uranometrics and themselves uranometricians." (M.E. Prior, TLS 29 Aug., 1975, 971/1) As with xerox, it appears the objection only indicates it is too late to stop the change.

Unlike phonological and syntactic change, in which variations already present in the language achieve greater and greater currency, neologisms are usually considered to be conscious innovations created for a specific purpose. According to Samuels, these demand "more motivation on the part of the user and more effort in understanding them on the part of the hearer" than other forms of change. (Samuels, p. 61) It is clear that some lexical innovations are self-conscious: William Safire's blandmanship, lame-duckiness, and new boy network derive some of their irony from their newness. But except for direct borrowings from other languages, most neologisms do not introduce totally new material. Rather, they recombine or alter the range of lexemes already present in English, producing new meaning by means of lexical variation.

Some innovations are not clearly conscious. They may originate from inertia or from stylistic variation just as phonological and syntactic changes do. For example, phonological transcription of speech produces

simple respelling (men's brifes, two draw file) but it can also produce lexical if not semantic change, e.g., alright, a variant of all right once considered an error (and still marked by The American Heritage Dictionary as 'a common misspelling' despite ME alriht), which is now common enough to be called "respectable" in Webster's Third and to draw no comment at all in Webster's New Collegiate (8th edition). The common of for contracted, unstressed have--as in we should of gone--indicates the conflation of two function words and suggests a semantic as well as lexical shift.

Semantic change can also be a function of variation in semantic performance. When the form of a term is unclear either to a specific individual or a segment of the speech community, it may be changed to a more familiar one. When forecast is not recognized as a preterite or a past participle it becomes regularized to fit the pattern more clearly: "Carson's officials have forecasted that Market Place will cut Lincoln Square's annual $20 million sales by one quarter." (Matt O'Connor, Champaign-Urbana News Gazette 14 Oct., 1975, 3/7) Similarly, when meaning is vague, a word's range of contexts may shift, e.g., the loss of the negative constraint on anymore: "Any service station operator ought to have a sideline anymore." When the literal meaning of a word is not current, it no longer constrains the development of the word. Schmaltz, the Yiddish term for rendered chicken fat, produced the adjective schmaltzy, 'sentimental or florid in music or art.' To some of those for whom the word schmaltz has no physical reality, the adjective has added the connotation 'stylish in an offbeat way,' presumably through the connection between sentimental and campy. When pale no longer means an area bounded by a palisade, it can refer metaphorically to any boundary. Once the notion of pale as 'stake'

disappears, boundary can be extended to any limit, or limitation; e.g., in the following it suggests 'beyond the imagined capability': "He's a liar, he's a perjurer, he has a kaleidoscope of criminal activity which seems beyond the pale of an ordinary human being." (John Wilson, NYTimes 2 Jan., 1975, 29/2) The frequency of this type of lexical variation indicates the flexibility of the standard written language in assimilating features of nonstandard usage.

Metaphoric coinages also draw on material already present in the language system: their innovation involves the yoking of previously unconnected ideas, e.g., the oxymoronic live-on-tape concert, 'a radio broadcast of a tape recording made at a performance before a live audience', metonymic big nose, 'non-Asian', or redlining (cf. bluepencil), originating (presumably) in the literal practice of drawing red lines around certain neighborhoods on maps to indicate areas not approved for mortgage investment, extending metaphorically to any restriction on lending practices. Even naming, whether of inventions, people, or animals, involves a certain amount of variation in spite of the uniqueness of the thing or person named. A name is generally accompanied by a set of alternatives, or nicknames which may themselves be innovations, as in the case of slant range camera/ acoustic camera, 'a camera that can take sound pictures through muddy water'; and post-Vietnam syndrome/PVS, "the label by which the extraordinary psychological difficulties of hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans have come to be identified" (Tom Wicker, NYTimes 27 May, 1975, 27/1); or they may be older 'synonyms'--light rail transit/trolley. The new name is a variant in a system of names, and its selection must be frequent if it is to survive.

The rarest English neologisms are unique words, created from scratch, i.e., words without derivations. The closest to this in the present collection is yuck, a variant of yak, 'laugh', cited mainly for its use as verb rather than noun: "Most Americans who yucked over minstrel show performers...." (Alden Whitman, NYTimes 18 Jan., 1975, 33/2) Since yuck is in some sense imitative it may be more appropriate to see it and other onomatopoetic words including ouch, ha ha, and aargh as derived from the world of natural sounds. A clearer example might be the undefined and perhaps ineffable grok, coined by Heinlein in Stranger in a Strange Land--but even grok may derive in part from the phonaestheme /gr/, cf. grope, grip, grapple. More common but still unusual are words that contain new or unfamiliar lexemes combined with more ordinary ones, e.g., cliometrician, 'historian who uses statistics', and perinatologist, 'pediatrician providing intensive care before, during, and after the birth of premature babies'; and revivals or reoccurrences of words considered archaic or obsolete, e.g., confectioned, 'iced, as a cake.'

The following categories are less rare:

a. Compounds of relatively familiar lexemes (one of which is often a Greek or Latin root), e.g., ethnopoetics, petrodollar, superrealistic, classism. Such compounds are likely to carry scientific or quasi-scientific connotations.

b. Direct borrowings from other languages, e.g., yakuza, "Japanese thugs, who, in their most romanticized form, are latter-day samurai with a touch of Robin Hood thrown in. As a group, they are comparable to the Mafia, with warring factions, overlords, a boss of bosses, and a formal code of behavior." (Lawrence van Gelder, NYTimes 20 Mar., 1975, 48/1--from

a review of a movie, The Yakuza) Also, acceuil, from French 'welcome': "The acceuil at La Grillade is delightful, the service efficient and friendly, and the general atmosphere a long, long way from Eighth Avenue." (John Canaday, NYTimes 24 Mar., 1975, 31/3)

c. Borrowings from other cultures (including calques), e.g., beer and hug, "a South Vietnamese institution... [where] soldiers and policemen were drinking beer and hugging hostesses provided by the owner." (James M. Markham, NYTimes 5 Feb., 1975, 3/1)

d. Borrowings from specialized or non-elite registers. Words like nontraditional student and bilingual education will no doubt remain tied to educational contexts, and drop, 'the initial charge registered by a taxi meter' is likely to remain in its present restricted register as long as it is seen as descriptive of the act of dropping the flag on the meter to start its operation. No-growth, a term that seems to originate in economic contexts, has quickly spread to other situations where growth can appear. Rip off, classified originally as slang of the hippie/drug subculture, is now acceptable enough to appear in unmarked contexts, e.g., statements on international trade and foreign policy, in the New York Times.

e. Words created by analogy, e.g., desexigrate (cf. desegregate), and blaxploitation (cf. sexploitation, in BDNE), referring to shows which depend "more on the blackness of the performers and the goodwill of the audiences, black and white, than on the talent of their creators for success." (Harris Green, NYTimes 20 July, 1975, sec. 2, 5/2)

The most common types of new words are the following:

f. Words modified to fit new syntactic slots, e.g., abortional, from noun to adjective; gas-short, from noun, gas shortage, to adjective;

group dynamic, a count noun, from the mass noun (with non-functional s-plural) group dynamics; hair-down, adjective derived from phrasal let one's hair down; Hiltonize, verb from proper noun; historic-district, adjective from noun, historic district, "the first neighborhood to lose historic-district status" (NYTimes, 18 Feb., 1975, 33/3); brain dead, adjective from noun, brain death.

g. Words whose range is extended, e.g., lay out, from V_t to ergative: "We are trying to find a buyer who'd make similar use of the building--it doesn't really lay out for commercial purposes." (J. R. White, NYTimes 8 Mar., 1975, 12/5); park, from V_t to ?passive ergative: "The streets were parked so full you couldn't have gotten a fire truck down one of them." (Betty Alexander, Champaign-Urbana News Gazette, 25 Aug., 1975, 3/7) Retread shows extension from original reference to tires to the military usage, where it is applied to humans (who sign up for additional tours of duty), to a more general notion of human recycling: "He served in the House from 1969 through 1973, when he was defeated, and returned this year as a 'retread' among the 92 House freshmen." (James M. Naughton, NYTimes 2 Mar., 1975, sec. 4, 3/5)

h. Words combined to form new phrases which act as single semantic units--perhaps the commonest and one of the subtlest sources of neologism in English. The production of new collocations of words is a function of linguistic creativity, and is one of the primary operations of natural language. Fortuitous collocations can, through repeated selection, fossilize into single semantic units, e.g., tomato stretch, 'a protein additive for tomato sauch or paste, made from beets'; checkbook journalism, "buying and selling news to the highest bidder but otherwise

remaining silent." (NYTimes, editorial, 25 Mar., 1975, 32/2) In some cases features such as alliteration or rhyme contribute to the fossilization, e.g., affirmative action, and white flight, 'the movement of whites from cities to suburbs to escape integration of neighborhoods and schools.'

In discussing lexical change and general diachronic theory I will focus on one general semantic change, the de-sexing of present-day English, and one specific word, chairperson. According to the diachronic theory of M. L. Samuels (1972), there are three basic causes of language change: variation (due to inertia or stylistic choice), systemic regulation, and contact with other speech groups. The spread of a term like chairperson is a form of systemic regulation. The new word restores distinctions lost due to the polysemy and consequent ambiguity of man and its compounds.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, man originally had the twofold sense of 'human being' and 'adult male human being' in all the Germanic languages. In Old English the male and female terms are usually wer and wif, and man, 'person', is used to refer to either sex:

(1) c.1000 AElfric — ae3ðer is man 3e wer 3e wif
one is either a man or a woman

(2) c1121 OEChron. — Þaes dohter waes 3ehaten Ercongota halifemne & wundorlic man

This daughter was called Ercongota, a holy-woman and wonderful person

Such usage continues to the seventeenth century, although by this time it is rare:

(3) 1618 J. King — The Lord had but one paire of men in Paradise.

The meaning of man, in Modern English, has shifted from the original neutral 'person'. According to the OED it now "primarily denotes the male sex,

though by implication referring also to women." (s.v. man, sense I.1.b.) Man, then, has become an ambiguous term. In general usage, it and the compounds in which it appears, point first to the masculine; although they can refer to women, the feminine is always a special case and implicitly inferior. Ambiguity is something semantic systems try to resolve: if a word acquires multiple meanings, its information content is lowered and it becomes a candidate for replacement by a more specific term. All the Germanic languages except English preserve the distinction between man in the sense of 'human being' and man in the sense of 'adult male human being' by creating separate, though derivative, terms for the latter, e.g., German Mensch. English partially resolves the ambiguity by seeking alternatives for man in many instances. "The gradual development of the use of the unambiguous synonyms body, person, one and (for the plural) folk(s), people has greatly narrowed the currency of man in this sense (of person); it is now literary and proverbial rather than colloquial." (OED, s.v. man, sense I.1.b.) However alternatives for compounds in which man appears, e.g., garbageman, have been slow to change, no doubt because many of the positions they refer to have been traditionally held by males.

Chairperson preserves one of the earliest meanings of person, 'a character sustained or assumed in a drama or the like, or in actual life; part played; hence function, office, capacity', and represents a serious attempt to counter the unthinking sexism of the older chairman by providing a term that is specifically neutral (the already existing chairwoman can fit contexts where sex is specified as female, but it does not reduce the inherent ambiguity of chairman). The polysemy of chairman is quite

low compared to that of other words that are presently unchallenged, e.g., of. It is therefore necessary to go beyond Samuels' theory to account for the change not only in terms of the resotration of lost information content but also in terms of the social forces which determine when distinctions need to be maintained.

It is possible to consider the short history of chairperson in terms of Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog's five aspects of language change: actuation, constraints on change, transition, embedding, and evaluation. > Its actuation is evidently conscious.
Chairperson is first noted in the Barnhart Dictionary of New English, which provides the following citation:

> And a group of women psychologists thanked the board for using the word 'chairperson' rather than 'chairman,' but argued that too much sexual discrimination still exists within the APA (American Psychological Association) and in the academic world. (Science News Sept. 11, 1971, p. 166)

As we see, the introduction of semantically neutral terminology will not cause a social revolution, but it is more just for those for whom the English language is an enemy, including those who are female, black, or poor. Offending connotations have a negative effect on self-image, and they can become self-fulfilling.

The constraints on the selection of chairperson are those applicable to lexical innovation in general and to the particular slot to be filled: the new word must conform to the established patterns of lexical innovation and it must fit the register of official meetings and committees. In addition, the innovation must be a 'happy' one: the major problem new words face is that of acceptance. New words sound awkward, and some monsters have been created. A recent publication, A Guide for the Media to Faculty

at Tufts University, introduces the unlikely term chairmember which, according to my informant there, "is the part of you you put on a chair." Words like chairperson may be adopted by administrative fiat, but acceptance is not guaranteed and it may be hindered by such adoption.

The transition period involves the gradual change from a stage in which an innovation is stereotyped sociologically to one in which it is not. For example, chairperson and other sex-neutral terms may be stereotyped by some speakers as being radical feminist vocabulary heralding the disintegration of the American family. For others, the sociological marking may not be quite so strong. There is a tendency for some to use sex-neutral terminology only in reference to women they think expect it, returning to sex-marked usage otherwise, e.g., chairperson used for women, chairman for men. In such cases, the apparently neutral chairperson becomes, in the idiolect of the speaker, a synonym for chairwoman. As the stereotype disappears the word becomes more available to the general speech community, and the change may be said to be complete.

Under embedding we must consider the changes that occur in the language that are concomitant with the change in question. A number of revisions in lexis are associated with sex-neutralization in English. For example, the Department of Labor has developed a list of occupational titles in which letter carrier, police officer, and fire fighter replace the older mailman, policeman, and fireman. Several alternatives to the generic use of the masculine pronoun have been suggested, e.g., compounding to form the often cumbersome he/she or (s)he; the alternation of masculine and feminine pronouns when sex-reference is unessential; the creation of a new neuter human pronoun; and the extension of the sexually neutral plural

they (reinforcing a tendency already present in some dialects to disregard number concord). In addition, words that are not inherently sexist are altered, e.g., history becomes herstory, in order to draw attention to the sexist assumption that most, if not all people are male. And new words are created for situations where a distinctly feminine term is required, e.g., "The projected hospitalization rate from IUD complications was 0.7 to 7.0 per 1,000 womenyears of use." (Daily Illini (AP) 7 Oct., 1975, 5/2)

Such changes, when viewed together, constitute a general semantic drift, a systemic regulation which can be evaluated as an attempt to reduce an ambiguity which is proving to be increasingly offensive socially. It is therefore a concomitant of a social movement, but it must be explained both in linguistic and sociological terms. Samuels does not deal sufficiently with the change process, while Weinreich, et al., do not account specifically enough for the linguistic processes that are the necessary, but not sufficient, accompaniments of change.

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